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ABSTRACT

Too often career counselors hear of, or work with, unemployed or underemployed foreign trained immigrant professionals. With the globalization of economy and shortages in skilled labor in Canada, the number of immigrant professionals is on the rise. It is becoming clear that services and programs are necessary to assist such individuals to ensure their contribution to the economy and smooth transition into a new country. However, the traditional job search and career development programs do not necessarily address the concerns and challenges that this group faces. This chapter identifies some of these challenges and proposes new programs and initiatives that may better address some of these concerns. (Contains 10 references.) (GCP)

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Assisting Foreign Trained Immigrant Professionals

by

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Assisting Foreign Trained Immigrant Professionals

Anahita Kadkhoda, M.Sc.

Introduction and Purpose

Too often we have heard of, or work with, unemployed or underemployed foreign trained immigrant professionals. With the globalization of economy and shortages in skilled labour in Canada, the number of immigrant professionals is on the rise. It is becoming clear that services and programs are necessary to assist such individuals to ensure their contribution to the economy and smooth transition into a new country.

However, the traditional job search and career development programs do not necessarily address the concerns and challenges that this group of individuals face. This paper identifies some of these challenges and proposes new programs and initiatives that may better address some of these concerns.

Anyone who works with foreign trained immigrant professionals or has an interest in their well-being and successful transition into North America may find this paper beneficial.

Challenges

The majority of immigrant professionals migrate to North America with great expectations to advance in their professional lives or to provide better education, work opportunities and security for their families. Unfortunately, many face great disappointment and frustration at the discrepancy between the expectations, attitudes and values held by their own culture and those of the Canadian and American societies. As a result, they experience a certain level of anxiety and stress while going through the acculturation and career transition process (Mak, 1991; Sandhu, 1997; Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991).

The process of immigration can be very stressful since the individuals are leaving behind all that is familiar and entering a world that may be extremely foreign to them. Sandhu (1997) states that some immigrants may undergo homesickness and culture shock, fear the future and perceive themselves to be objects of discrimination. He describes these feelings to be part of the "acculturation stress" which some immigrants experience upon migrating to a new country. He also indicates, that many of these immigrants also endure "economic stress" whereby their lack of North American job search skills, English language proficiency and social support hinders their ability to secure a position. This is augmented by their sudden realization that the ease by

which they expected to find a job in the new country is not valid, and that their credentials, experience and knowledge are not recognized. Many are greatly distressed to see their savings be spent so quickly soon after immigrating to the new country, with little hope of immediate job prospects within their field of expertise.

Many immigrant professionals are accustomed to being seen by their families and co-workers as the elite in their native countries because of the social power and economic gain which their high status occupations granted them (Mak, 1991). However, in North America they feel a loss of power, life style and status because their accomplishments are unknown or not recognized.

This sudden loss, in combination with their inability to provide the same life style for their families, results in psychological stress which may manifest itself in various forms and impact other individuals in the family. For example, role reversals may occur in the household for which family members may not be prepared to handle. Furthermore, because of the move, many of these families have lost their social network. As a result, the family may feel torn because they no longer have their extended family as social support, and believe that disclosure of distressed feelings to an outsider would result in losing their family's honour (Gillis, 1995).

Characteristics and Issues Which May Interfere With Typical Career Development of This Population

General career development theories are based on the assumption that everyone endures the career development process in the same manner. Because these theories were originally based on the North American population, they presume that all individuals have access to equal opportunities and resources, speak the same language and have similar career values. However, due to the different characteristics and issues that immigrant professionals, especially those from non-English speaking countries encounter, the following variables interfere with the typical career development: loss of status, transition process, acculturation and economic stress, limited English proficiency, different cultural values, circumstance of immigration, and attitudes towards the mental health profession.

Furthermore, Westwood and Ishiyama (1991) contend that stress of culture shock negatively affects immigrants' ability to gather information, solve problems, and/or make decisions. Because all these skills are necessary to make career decisions, such stress may hinder the career development process of immigrants. In addition, some of these professionals may be from countries in which a formalized process of career planning and job search has not been established. As a result, the whole process is new to them and they may not have developed the necessary job search skills for success in North America (Rubrecht & Gillis, 1993). In addition, there are different work values to which these immigrants are accustomed, which may be very difficult to fulfill, if the North American work style does not attach importance to them. As a consequence, they may feel additional confusion, stress and depression (Amundson, Firbank & Poehnell, 1991; Mak, 1991; Mak, Westwood & Ishiyama, 1994; Nash, 1995; Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991).

Consequently, due to the mentioned factors, the majority of these professional immigrants are forced to accept lower status jobs with reduced salary. Others may attempt to start their own business and some may even elect to be unemployed. No matter which avenue they choose, for the majority, such experiences would be new and "alien" to them (Mak, 1991). Therefore, in

order to assist these immigrants to accomplish a more successful career transition, it is important to provide them with appropriate services, so that they may regain their confidence and successfully demonstrate their skills and knowledge in their new country.

Strategies (programs and initiatives)

Due to the complexity of the challenges the immigrant professionals face, it is important that interventions occur at variety of levels including: the individual, family system, educational institutions, professional associations, local and national governments and the community on the whole.

The individual professional may need assistance in several areas such as English language instruction (including general, business and technical areas), cross-cultural communication training, upgrading of relevant technical skills to meet the needs of local employers, personal counselling, career exploration and job search skills (Kadkhoda, 1999).

In case of other family members having immigrated together, it would be beneficial to discuss the potential impact of immigration on the family as a system. By raising awareness and normalizing the feelings that each member may be experiencing, the family can then be a more effective source of support to each other.

Educational institutions would better assist the immigrant professional, by offering prior learning assessment which would be consistent with professional association expectations and through out the country. In addition, the offering of modular course/sessions would allow immigrant professionals to upgrade specific required skills instead of earning a whole new degree (Looking Ahead, 2002). The inclusion of internship or co-op programs would also allow these professionals to gain some very relevant work experience and employers to assess the professionals' skills. Professional career fairs that concentrate on connecting immigrant professionals with employers would also be valuable. These options would allow the professionals to apply their knowledge much quicker to the industry and feel confident that their training has prepared them to meet the needs of the employers. Moreover, employers would also be certain that these professionals have gained the necessary training to apply their knowledge immediately to the organization.

Professional associations are encouraged to establish standards that are national to decrease confusion for the immigrant professional and ease relocation possibilities within the country. Although, the primary responsibility of the association is to protect the public and ensure their safety, there needs to be some flexibility among the standards, without placing anyone in danger. One way to accomplish this is to work closely with educational institutions, to ensure that relevant skills are being instructed through the courses being offered. The majority of immigrant professionals express their desire to work within their field of expertise, even if it means that they need to start at a lower level, in order to learn the relevant skills related to a particular employer or accustom themselves to the working culture of the new country. Thus, associations may benefit from examining their field closely and identifying stages within a job classification to which the immigrants could apply their skills and knowledge. Another means by which associations could assist immigrant professionals is by offering a mentorship program. The mentorship would not only help immigrants connect with like minded professionals, but also through this process potential employers could assess the skills of the immigrants and find appropriate candidates or suggest steps that the immigrant may wish to take to further their

candidacy within the field.

Local and national governments are asked to assist the immigrant professionals by offering funding on several levels. Employers are more likely to hire immigrants if they are given some sort of an incentive. Thus wage subsidy programs provided by the government could be one of those incentives. Governments could also work with professional associations to develop a system, where employers would be recognized for hiring immigrants. Funding is also necessary for programs and agencies that would specifically work with immigrant professionals. This funding would be used to hire knowledgeable staff who understand issues and challenges that this particular group of clients face and be given time and resources to address them appropriately. Funding is also necessary to create up-to-date profiles on particular professions and their outlook in different parts of the country, which may be accessed by potential immigrants from their own country of origin. Accurate information about financial expectation, professional association standards and educational institution requirements, specialized career/ job search programs are the kind of information that potential immigrants could benefit in knowing. Much of this information can be placed on-line and made available through printed booklets or via information sessions delivered through the consulate offices.

With the influx of immigrants it is important to raise awareness and educate the communities. Information sessions and resources could be made available to better understand the issues surrounding immigration and address concerns that may be raised.

Samples of current initiatives in British Columbia, Canada

Certain associations have taken steps in assisting immigrant professionals. Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of BC, College of Nurses of BC and BC College of Teachers currently are in the process of developing and implementing pilot projects. It is still too early to tell what the results may be, however, some of the innovative procedures that have been taken into consideration include working closely with educational institution to offer modular courses for upgrading of professional skills, teaching relevant technical terminology with the ESL component, having job placement or internship components within the program, and offering cross-cultural communication training.

An initiative called Looking Ahead was established in 1999. This initiative is a multi-sectoral action group dedicated to improving the integration of immigrants in British Columbia, Canada. The steering committee is composed of representatives from educational institutions, provincial and federal governments, professional associations, and service providers. The initiative organized several forums where valuable discussions with regards to the transition and integration of immigrant professionals took place. These forums also allowed a venue to brainstorm for ideas and ways to implement some of the suggestions. It also raised awareness and allowed representatives from various agencies to work together, sometimes for the first time.

In 1999 NETWERCC (Networking, Education & Training for Workers in Employment, Rehabilitation and Career Counselling) took steps in addressing the issues and challenges that service providers where encountering while trying to assist immigrant professionals. NETWERCC sponsors the FTIP (Foreign Trained Immigrant Professionals) Focus Committee whose main focus is to disseminate and educate its members on issues that related to immigrant professionals. Through this process, it also raises awareness and discusses concerns with various

groups such as the provincial and federal government, professional associations and educational institutions. In order not to repeat initiatives and instead help the cause of immigrant professionals, FTIP Focus Committee also works closely with Looking Ahead which was mentioned earlier.

Summary

Now more than ever, it is important to address the needs of immigrant professionals and assist them with their career transition. Too many immigrant professionals are unemployed or under employed, while North America faces critical skill shortages in certain professions. Instead of contributing to the economy by applying their special skills, some of these professionals and their families may be forced to depend on social programs such as welfare and social security in order to survive. As a result, it is crucial that agencies, professional associations, educational institutions and government work together to create specialized programs and services necessary to assist these immigrants with their career transition, support their acculturation into the North American society and help them contribute to the economy.

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